"Inside" and "Outside" of Borders: The Role of Language and Religion in Identity

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In this study, I will split the rather broad subject of the title into two questions, and illustrate my approach to each of them with examples. 1. How can the concept of identity and its dual nature be grasped? 2. How can language and religion be brought into relation with the concept of identity?

In terms of logic, identity is equality, correspondence between two or more things. It is a concept that has long been in use in philosophy; analysed by Greeks, a subject since the time of the scholastica. In a longer study, it would not hurt to briefly recall the expansion and application of the concept of identity in the social sciences. Since the sixties, that is, for nearly a generation, the concept of identity is one that has been a main organising force. Representatives of several professional fields have done quite a lot for the development of the concept, and in the refinement of its use. (Niedermüller – Váriné Szilágyi 1989). In this essay, however, I do not regard the critical review of the literature on identity as my primary goal (see Huseby 1985; Erőss [ed.]).

Most concisely, identity means self-equivalence sustained over space and time. We may summarise this notion in the two questions, with which we are all familiar, though they are hardly capable of being answered conclusively: who am I and, who are we? We may quote Ferenc Pataki as to the fundamental social-psychological question of identity theory: "In what way and through what sort of psychic mediation and operating means can that peculiar 'thing', that unique 'materiality', which we call social person or personality be identical to itself in the course of its finite and limited individual life?" (Pataki 1986:47) According to the cliché, consciousness of identity can be

grasped at both at the individual and group level. As Ferenc Erős puts it: "Identity has two profiles: it connects the individual to other people, and at the same time, however, it makes the individual distinguishable from others...our self-identity, in a certain sense, is nothing but internalised group-identity. The manifestation of our group-identity, however necessitates the manifestation of our selves" (Erős 1995:423). We may agree with György Csepeli, that "identity only exists in the abstract world of mathematical equations, ... The paradox of human consciousness of identity is that it carries the possibility of disappearing or being lost. Identity is an intellectual creation of great impact; delusion and reality at the same time" (Csepeli 1996:33). The disappearance or loss of identity (disregarding pathological cases for now) is a danger inherent in one of modern society's most important characteristics: individuals are able to define themselves in so many ways, and attempt to undertake and identify with roles in so many kinds of relational systems, that at the intersection of the various circles, hardly anything remains that could remind us of a resolute inner core. It is no accident that the entire concept of identity was created partly in connection with the recognition of the emergence of diverse identity disturbances. Numerous signs of these disturbances can be encountered by any of us in our own narrow world or in the wider environment.

Group identities can build on one another, and can also exist independently of one another. To a greater or less degree, and with considerable change over time, we identify with our families, our schools, the community in which we live, our church, etc. We may regard national identification as one of the broadest group identities, one in which both language and religion are exceptionally important factors. Language is important as the primary instrument of understanding and communication, while religion's importance is in the foundation of the value system and in the organisation of the relationship between man and God. This concept is not a recent one, we might recall József Eötvös' (1978. III:351) concise definition of nationality: "Nationality is a consciousness of belonging together that develops among a large number of people, through memories of their past, their present situation, and through what flows from these, their community of interests and emotions" (quoted by Fábián 1994).

In connection with the concept of identity, I would like to call attention to a quite simple duality, a kind of "binary opposition", which could possibly be just as valid for national or ethnic identities as it can be for the identities of smaller groups. Ethnic identity can be portrayed visually in two ways. We may place the emphasis either on the borders, the outline, or on everything that is within the outline, that is, the

bordered. If we emphasise the borders, then we suggest that the members of a group are those who are circumscribed by a particular border. Naturally, I am thinking not of the borders of countries, but in a broader sense, of symbolic border designations with any kind of validity. These can be drawn from within and without: what is important is that borders be perceived and considered valid by the group, more or less as a whole. If we again refrain from remarks on the history of the concept, this sensibility allows us to make the subject of our investigation broadly the real and/or symbolic establishment and maintenance of borders, along with all the other conceivable operations regarding them. Within this approach, we attribute less significance to what is inside the borders: the layering there and its mutability, for example, appear less important. We also attribute less significance to the certain truth that most borders cannot be drawn as a simple line, but rather, in the majority of cases they are more like border zones, in which we may encounter a variegated mixture of transitions.

The other possibility in terms of the fixing of ethnic and national identity is to emphasise not so much the symbolic borders, but rather, to emphasise what is inside the borders. Naturally, cultural characteristics come to mind primarily. Before all else, common language or common use of language, numerous details in the organisation of culture, consciousness of community in religion, origin and belonging, marriage relations—the list could go on for a long time. We could put the entire category of (national) tradition here, and the investigation of any cultural element—from the reed whistle to the barn roofs, from ballad motifs to folk sorcery—can be brought into direct connection with the marks of ethnicity, the constituents of identity. The ethnographic research paradigm, which looked for and found ethnic specificities in the culture of a people living in a particular land or country, could give evocative examples of this approach.

Visually, the difference between the two approaches can be compared to the difference between the outline of a circle, and a patch (which might be circular). If we take this analogy a little further, we can see that the borders are not always where the common characteristics end: they can be both broader and narrower. Anyone who glances at the ethnic and political map of the Carpathian basin can see the illustration of this thought.

The two types of nation-concept, nation-state and cultural-nation are consonant with this duality. The national-state approach holds that those who live in one state, the citizens who reside within those borders are members of a nation (the French concept of nation is considered the model of this approach). In the cultural-nation approach, the

members of the nation are those who have in common cultural characteristics and achievements—language, origin, religion, consciousness of origin, goals, etc., (the model of this would be the German approach). In the historical evolution of the Hungarian concept of nation, traces of both approaches can be found, and it would be interesting to follow the many interesting details of this evolution, and its cause (Lázár 1994).

This duality also has traces in the diverse scientific-historical tradition regarding identity. There are those who stress one version, and those who prefer the other. Opinions can sometimes only be deduced from divergence in emphasis or in the explicit or implicit critique of what others emphasise. We may get the impression that those who argue in favour of one or the other model—though they know the alternative has some degree of truth to it—actually try to establish the exclusive truth of their model. In terms of ethnic or national identity, those who argue in favour of the importance of borders tend to overestimate their importance and as a result, to underestimate the importance or significance of what is inside the borders. As if one could take any part of the bordered contents, the circle of language, religion, dress, tradition, and allow historical accident to form "border signs". As elements raised to the symbolic level, the signs proceed to designate and reinforce borders between groups, and at the same time, they could be considered inessential. (An example of this is the András Kovács 1992 study on Hungarian Jewish identity). From here, one is hard-pressed to understand the insistence of those who consider the bordered contents more important than the existence or non-existence of the borders. In contrast, those who argue in favour of "patch-like" identity, those who give greater emphasis to the elements of content (for example, identity of culture, origin), sometimes do not see the borders either inside the group or around it, yet they are there, or can very much be present, in both places. They do not see them because they only aim to describe or understand as precisely as possible the divergent contents.

In the present work, I would like to argue that the two approaches are legitimate together and simultaneously. The two modes of argumentation, the two approaches to identity complement rather than exclude one another, and their recognition can shorten or avert sterile arguments over subtle shading and emphasis. I mean that it is worthwhile to consider and make clear in each instance whether the borders themselves are the subject or the bordered. If we do not mix these two, and do not equate them, then we may understand, for example, that we are not always speaking of characteristics that divide identities, when

we speak of, or experience cultural (linguistic, religious, etc.) differences—because those differences have not become "border-signs", they have not become permeated by the symbolic surplus of meaning, which would give them the power to distinguish. When we look at the finer or more drastic divergences in border signs, or the radical power they sometimes exert, we cannot be as certain that what is beyond those borders differs as radically.

Beyond this, applying the two points of view together can assist us in rendering comprehensible phenomena that were difficult to understand without taking into consideration the other point of view. A community can surround itself with powerful symbolic borders—whereas what can be found within the borders is not nearly so different. One example could be the differences in national dress in the case of villages belonging to the same dress region or ethnic group: in Palócföld and Székelyföld, for a long time the home village of a boy or girl arriving at a market or festival could easily be discerned by dress, while in lifestyle, religion and language, there was hardly any difference. As a consequence of the forceful designation of boundaries, however, they—and "outsiders" they have trained, ethnographic researchers, for example—tend to attribute greater significance to the convergences or divergences in content than reality warrants. This was the cause for the border of the Ormánság, for example, to be drawn for a time—following the opinions heard in the villages—around the area where the wearing of the *péntő*, the characteristic underskirt was customary. Some other examples, perhaps more distant, but understandable: football teams, scout troops, school with long-standing traditions, all have their insignia, slogans, uniforms. These are border signs with the well-balanced and more often than not well-understood characteristic that they do not only distinguish the group but also bonds those within the group together.

Situations may exist where despite quite forcefully divergent cultural characteristics, the designation of borders are still quite weak, though the differences can be perceived by anyone. An example of this is the relatively easily achieved, large number of marriages between members of different denominations: the Reformed and Catholic church, the Evangelical and Orthodox churches differ, but at many times and in many places, they do not draw sharp borders between each other. In these cases, one may naturally wonder whether the issue is the weakness of the borders or the giving up of one's own identity (due to pressure or voluntarily).

An ethnic group can draw a border around itself, and others can draw a border around it. In extreme cases, these borders can take the

form of minefields, barbed wire or the ghetto wall. I would like to stress that these are the extreme cases, and I do not intend to approach every kind of border that is drawn from the outside as the precursor of barbed wire. Nor do I believe that only borders drawn from the inside are legitimate, and that it is meaningless or positively harmful to describe or name others according to our own point of view. Only in the world of illusion can the broad-ranging issues and relationships of we and them be conceived on the basis of a sensibility of tolerance which gives sole legitimacy to borders drawn by the bordered—the borders drawn must be accepted by the "others" who might draw them elsewhere.

The question can now be formulated: in what way do language and religion operate in the marking of borders. Another question is: what sort of designation makes symbolic borders render differences in language and religion perceptible, or gives them the power to divide, or makes it possible to cross them, or break through them, etc. Clearly—as I have already mentioned—the linguistic community, the community of native-speakers of a language is the basis of all kinds of human communication, the fundamental condition of understanding. In the case of language, one might actually say that the division of border and bordered is almost meaningless from the standpoint of identity. The most obvious accompaniment to transformation of national identity is usually a change in language, and in modern Europe, changing languages hardly ever runs its course without change in identity as well; for example, let us think of the Hungarians of Burgenland. Language change unaccompanied by change in identity mostly happens when the core of identity is not so much the linguistic community as something else, probably religion.

In our vicinity, we could cite the instance of the Csángó(s) of Moldva. For them, religious affiliation is demonstrably stronger than linguistic affiliation. Despite a change in language, the Catholic religion and Catholic identity has remained firmly entrenched. If one asks the Csángós about their ethnic identity—and is not satisfied by the appellation Csángó—they will identify themselves as Hungarian on the basis of cultural marks most Hungarians would be hard-pressed to accept. Of course, we must add that their continued faith in the Catholic religion was not and is not simply due to the brave and steadfast determination of the people of the villages. In the case of the institutional and hierarchical church, the "autonomous" practice of religion over a long period of time is not conceivable since the time of the Council of Trent. The papacy, bishops, organisations of religious law, and a financial basis are all required. If we consider the sort of gaps that had to be

filled in the 18th Century by a Transylvanian Bishopric that had been vacant for almost a century and a half, we cannot be surprised (though we may regret) that neither there nor in the Hungarian Bishoprics was there enough energy left for ministering to the Csángós in Hungarian. Of course, the foregoing does not mean Romanian Roman Catholic Bishoprics cannot or need not attend to the increasingly effectively expressed demand for Hungarian ministering of their Hungarian faithful.

Religious unity and the palpable experience of religious cohesion have a determining role in identity. Let us think of the power with which the Pentecostal Festival of Csíksomlyó (Şumuleu, Romania) embodies the cohesion of Catholic Hungarians. The strength of this cohesion has long taken on a national tint, and recently at the festival, Hungarian national identity has been also expressed and celebrated. We could cite other examples too, pilgrimages in smaller regions, those of Szeged-Alsóváros, Máriaradna (Radna, Romania), etc. Many pilgrimage destinations are visited by a wide assortment of nationalities, with equal enthusiasm, providing an opportunity for meetings, even for making acquaintances that can lead to marriage.

In Europe, through the centuries, the language of religion and the native language were separate: in the area of Western Christianity, the Sacred Liturgy was conducted in a language other than the one used in everyday life. Far-reaching change was brought first by the Reformation, which radically connected religion and the native language, and at the same time connected religion to an identity more forcefully than anything had done before. We may recall how religious division among members of the same nation has led to bloody antagonism—and still does today (Northern Ireland, Serbia, etc.). The other far-reaching changes were the liturgy in national languages adopted by the second Vatican Council, and the spread of Bible translations. Elek Bartha's research in the Southern regions showed, among other things, that as long as the liturgy was conducted in Latin, with the sermon alternately conducted in the language of the three different nationalities, the Hungarians, Germans and Bulgarians (in Croatia), the members of the same Catholic religion attended church together. The introduction of the new order actually led to more drastic separation than ever before, at least in terms of Mass attendance by members of the same religion who lived in the same settlement (Bartha 1987).

Religious affiliation is strongly connected to national identity in many cases—either in the sense that religion is more or less located on "the border", and if we use the other border paradigm, it creates a separable characteristic. (I mean to suggest that in neither case can we

speak of complete correspondence between religion and ethnicity.) At the same time, religious division coupled with strong national consciousness can prevent or at least delay the formation of national identity. The strengthening of Hungarian national consciousness unquestionably occurred in those decades when religious and denominational opposition was fading, in the 19th century. This did not necessarily mean a greater degree of toleration, only that the emergence of the rational, evolutionary world view lessened the power of the great religions to forge identity. We may consider, for example, what differences can be discovered in Romanian national consciousness as a result of Greek Transylvanian Catholics and the Orthodox thinkers of Northeastern Romania.

The evolution of Jewish identity, among others, sheds light on the close interweaving of language, religion and identity over thousands of years, and also on how radically the three can diverge in the modern era. It is no accident that many borderline cases and unusual evolutions of ethnic identity in Hungary and elsewhere have been analysed with respect to Jewish communities that have travelled a winding historical path. Among the many approaches, I would like to refer at this point to that of Ferenc Fejtő, the author and resident of Paris who is comfortable moving between Judaism and Christianity. In his book, *A zsidó és az Úristen* (The Jew and God), published in 1997, the fundamental notion is the transformation in the relationship of the chosen people to its own God, and the consequences of that transformation.

Dangers and the perception of menace usually create more sharply drawn borders between groups and national communities of divergent identity. At these times, the process of symbol-creation is strengthened, and any characteristic can become a border sign. We might recall the Hungarian language report cards in Slovakian schools, or the antagonism around Babeş-Bolyai University. To look a little further afield, a newspaper reported that in Germany recently, a public school teacher's bid to gain public servant status was rejected, because her headwear revealed that she was a fervent Muslim. Anyone could add to this list of examples. The danger is that in times of increased attention to the borders, and during symbolic gestures of defence, nurturing and maintenance of everything that is "within the borders" is forced into the background. In consequence, consciousness of identity can break down at unexpected moments and in unexpected situations. Most likely, the roots of the minority religion and identity question in the Mezőség (Romania) can be found here.

Finally, I would like to make a single remark, in reference to a distant analogy, perhaps, and in the interests of demonstrating that we do

not occupy ourselves with these questions in vain. Indeed, these issues are not just a manifestation of a not very large field, ethnography, being pre-occupied with its own, internal problems. In a recently published book entitled *Cultural Borders and Identity,* Patricia Lysaght presents a thorough study of the relationship between language, religion and national identity; on the basis of the Irish example. Her basic question: in a Europe making decisive steps toward union and promoting integration on the institutional level too, what place and role do the Irish have, what can the notion of being "Irish" mean and offer? To formulate her answer, she gives an overview of the whole of Irish history starting from the time when Irish missionaries departed from the edge of Europe to missions among the European peoples, and through to the present day, when bloody antagonism divides the Irish—mainly in Northern-Ireland—along religious borders. In its own way, Ireland too is on the periphery of Europe, the Irish must take steps similar to the ones with which we Hungarians are struggling. It is quite edifying to note that in Ireland, this task is carried out not only by politicians, journalists and economists. Ethnographers and museologists also participate, or at least declare their competence to do so.

We may also take to heart the matter raised by Bertalan Andásfalvy in the introduction to "Nemzetiség – Identitás (Nationality – identity)". According to him, no one—neither individual nor community will be capable of tolerance, and the recognition and acceptance of the values of others (if they are really values, and not just some kind of mythified "otherness", which, by itself, is never deserving of respect), without mastering emotion; that is, without learning to handle temper and emotions, expressing them in creation, in art, words or movement. The designation of borders is increasingly accompanied by the development of abilities necessary to cross those borders, while with the help of religion, language and all the other factors that help to create identity, each person must hold on to his own consciousness of identity—so that society does not wither into crowds without faces and cores, so that we may find the places where we feel at home, where we may invite others to share in the warmth of home.

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